

HOTELS, HOOTERS AND HAUL-OUTS: The Future of Commercial Fisheries Access?

Commercial fishing is often referred to as America's first industry. From the cod-rich Grand Banks of the northeast to the salmon-filled rivers of the west, communities have grown along all of our coasts to take advantage of secure ports and access to ocean resources. Our greatest coastal cities are located where they are because of ocean trade - and much of that trade has been in natural resources. And fish - which historically included marine mammals - were a large part of those resources.

Fulton Fish Market in New York, the Boston Fish Pier, and Fishermen's Wharf in San Francisco all epitomized the importance of the commercial seafood industry to our growing nation. Our mastery of the seas, wrested competitively from the British Empire, was due in large part to our fleet of Yankee clippers whose genesis was the coastal fishing craft and later the whaling ships of Salem and New Bedford. The purchase of Alaska was founded in large part on the perceived economic advantages that would accrue from the whale, salmon, and fur seal harvest that was underutilized by the Russian American Company. The history of almost every coastal town in Oregon leads back to the salmon runs - and it was San Francisco that grew and prospered as a result, as it was the shipping and receiving center for the west coast long before Seattle or Los Angeles. Native Americans knew that fishing was important; the Stevens Treaties signed in 1854 - 55 maintained the right of Washington tribes to fish in their usual and accustomed areas. The influence of commercial fishing on our history is probably best embodied in Massachusetts, whose House of Representatives is the only legislative body in the country to debate under the watchful eyes of a huge wooden cod.

But today, things have changed. The last fishing boat delivered to Fulton Fish Market decades ago and after 180 years of operation the market itself has moved from its historic location on the Manhattan waterfront to a larger inland location in the Bronx. The Boston Fish Pier continues to operate but redevelopment in the form of upscale shops and restaurants is gradually encroaching on its operations. Fishermen's Wharf is now mostly the home of hotels, restaurants, and tourist traps; historic Fish Alley, once a working pier, is now the gateway to T-shirt shops and the Sunglass Hut. Even the vessel slips, once crowded with boats, are now home to only a few, several of which offer harbor tours. The once proud waterfront that teemed with commerce is now filled with tourists watching sea lions snooze on the abandoned docks.

And it's not just the big cities that have redeveloped their working commercial seafood areas. The town of Florence, Oregon, founded by on the banks of the Siuslaw River by salmon canners, is now described by the Chamber of Commerce on their web site as

“a top retirement choice located on the central Oregon coast along U.S. Highway 101, the Pacific Coast Scenic Byway, providing convenient access to a host of outdoor recreational activities and breathtaking scenery. The Florence, Oregon area is popular as a diverse and rich "playground" destination, where lush green forests meet the ocean's edge along one of America's most beautiful and dramatic coastlines.”

Sounds lovely - and it is - but what does it mean for our economy, for the people whose livelihood depends on the commercial fisheries, even for our national well-being?

In spite of all the mercury scares, the dubious claims that all ocean life is being destroyed, there is no doubt that fish is good for us. Over the past few years, we have heard from the American Heart Association, the American College of Cardiology, the Alzheimer Association, the National Academies of Science, Harvard Medical School, the University of Rochester School of Medicine, the University of North Carolina, and research scientists in Greece, Italy, and Japan that a diet high in seafood has positive effects on the brain and the circulatory system, improves childhood development, and may increase life span.

American consumers have responded to that news. Per capita fish consumption is generally increasing. Seafood restaurants have become good investments. McCormick and Schmick's, which started out with a single restaurant in Portland 30 years ago, now operates 72 restaurants throughout the U.S. and Canada, trades on the NASDAQ Exchange, and employs over 5,000 workers. Even the traditional meat-based fast food enterprises have gotten into the act: in February, Kentucky Fried Chicken announced it was seeking a papal blessing for its new Fish Snacker Sandwich in time for Lent (no word on whether His Holiness responded). KFC claims that it serves 12 million customers each day; that's a huge potential for seafood.

But where are we getting all this good healthy fish? According to statistics from the National Marine Fisheries Service, in 2006 edible seafood imports were twice the amount - and nearly 3 times the value - of seafood exports. In 2005, NMFS estimated that nearly 80% of the seafood consumed in the U.S. was imported. Salmon from Chile, mussels and whitefish from New Zealand, shrimp from Asia, tuna and swordfish from Mexico are all eagerly consumed by hungry Americans. Even McCormick and Schmick's, which prides itself on providing regional varieties of fresh seafood, devotes a portion of its menu to exotic fare.

Meanwhile, our domestic capability to harvest, process, and transport seafood continues to decline. A study conducted for the North Carolina Legislature by Garrity-Blake and Nash in 2006 showed a 30% decrease in fish houses in that state since the turn of the century. On the west coast, restrictions on harvest, imposition of large-scale areas closed to fishing, and reductions in harvest capacity have led to closures and consolidation. In California, there is only one processing plant on the entire coast which has the equipment necessary to process locally caught pink shrimp (*Pandalus jordani*). Fort Bragg, California, has seen 66% of its processing capacity disappear in the last decade. Crescent City, California, has shrunk from 4 processors to 1. Brookings, Oregon, is barely hanging on to a publicly financed freezing facility thanks to federal grants; the only large private processor locked its doors 6 years ago. In Morro Bay, California, a group of fishermen has banded together to sell their fishing permits to an environmental coalition because they no longer have a place to process their fish. Coast wide, the groundfish trawl fleet has been reduced by nearly a third as a result of an industry / federal buyback program. Similar buyback programs are occurring or being contemplated in Florida and Alaska and among Dungeness crab fishermen in Washington.

And in most cases, once the business is gone it doesn't come back. As more than one processor has remarked to me, harvest restrictions to rebuild distressed stocks are fine, but the ability to process fish is unlikely to be there once harvest is allowed in the future. Some of that dismal prediction involves the loss of skilled workers such as filleters, but the loss of land and buildings to other uses also takes its toll. Once you convert a working wharf into a restaurant / shopping mall, you are not going to turn it back into a fish plant.

It is somewhat ironic that NMFS is avidly promoting offshore aquaculture as a means of achieving food security. While there is some merit to the concept, what is being ignored in the argument over where to site the floating cages is where the fish are going to be delivered to shore, unloaded, and processed. Without the infrastructure - the processing facilities, the freezers, and the transportation hubs - we can grow all the fish we want but we can't get their products to the people who will eat them.

Some might argue that it makes little difference, that coastal population and jobs are growing. However, Dr. Charles Colgan of the University of Southern Maine, in a report presented to the National Governors Association in 2003, found that all of the coastal job growth between 1990 and 2000 occurred in the tourism and recreation sectors; further, these sectors provide a minority of economic output when compared to other ocean industries. In addition, the real population growth in coastal areas did not come from permanent residents; and not surprising, land conversion for housing in coastal areas occurred at a faster rate than population growth.

So is it all doom and gloom, or is there light at the end of the tunnel that is not connected to an on-coming train? Obviously, the American consumer wants more seafood. And at least some members of that population want fresh, locally caught products, or at least wild fish as opposed to cultured. To get that, they are going to need to make deliberate choices in how waterfronts are used and how access is granted.

Some areas are already working in this direction. Maine has developed a program of tax incentives and grants to preserve working waterfronts. In fact, Senator Collins of Maine was so impressed with the state program that she has introduced legislation - S. 741 - to expand the grant program to the federal level. While any new federal funding is a risky proposition, the fact that the loss of working waterfronts - and the need to stop that loss - is getting attention in the United States Senate is a good thing.

In Oregon, we have several local efforts occurring which - if they are not inadvertently derailed by conflicting state level priorities - will prove helpful in keeping access for the commercial seafood industry. Astoria has devoted a stretch of its Port land to construction and development of a new seafood complex to replace an aging processing plant that has been hemmed in by tourism development. The new facility - co-located with transportation access and a fishermen's gear supply store - is completely up-to-date, meets federal food safety requirements, and provides a public education component so that people can actually watch their food being processed.

Warrenton, in a partnership with a major seafood processor, has leveraged federal funds to construct new water treatment facilities that not only improve the quality of the Skipanon River but also ensure that the processor can continue to operate in its current location.

Newport has enacted a strict zoning code which restricts tourism facilities to the landward side of its waterfront street and keeps the water side open to working docks and processing plants. Newport is also looking at expanding some unused port land to construct a public seafood market and has passed a bond issue to rebuild piers used by larger vessels in the fishing fleet.

So yes, there is hope for the future. We will no doubt continue to see some consolidation, some loss of ports, because sheer economics will make it happen. But I think we will also see synergy among users leading to a push for continuation of working waterfronts. The examples I gave of Astoria and Newport, Oregon, show how it can be done. Warrenton's waste water treatment facility - fondly referred to as "the Golden Pipe" - demonstrates how communities and waterfront businesses can work together to solve problems for both. Some states are looking strongly at wave energy as an environmentally benign alternative for power supplies; those cables are going to have to come ashore someplace and the power needs to be converted into consumer usable electricity. And even the coastal condo owners who object to those noisy, smelly fishing boats leaving before dawn are beginning to realize that they need to keep the boats around: on the west coast, your harbor doesn't get dredged unless you have a certain volume of commercial vessel traffic, a volume that largely consists of fishing vessels.

So as we go through the next few days, I hope we will all be looking at innovative ways to preserve working waterfronts and - more importantly - ways that sometimes competing uses can work together to provide access to all of us.